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ABSTRACT

Parent-child interactions in the public library were analyzed in an observational study. One hundred and twenty-one observations were made in the children's section of a public library, using an observational protocol to identify the adults accompanying children to the library and to tabulate parent-child behaviors during the library visit. Results indicated that, regardless of whether the child was accompanied by just the father or mother, or by both, the mothers displayed more interactive behavior with their children than the fathers. These findings suggest that early childhood educators and librarians need to continue their efforts to encourage parents, particularly fathers, to take an active interest in the early literacy experiences of their children. (Contains 13 references.) (Author/SW)

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PARENT-CHILD LIBRARY INTERACTIONS: AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY

Linda Reichenauer

Abstract

Parent-child interactions in the public library are analyzed in this observational study. One hundred and twenty-one observations were made in the children's section of a local branch of the Edmonton Public Library during library weekend operating hours. An observational protocol was used to identify the adult(s) accompanying the child(ren) to the library and to tabulate parent-child behaviours during the library visit. Behaviours were characterized as falling along a continuum from least to most interactive. It was found that the mother on her own was responsible for accompanying young children to the library in half of the observed cases. Approximately fifty-two percent of mothers' behaviours were categorized as "less interactive" compared to approximately sixty-seven percent of the behaviours of fathers who accompanied their child(ren) on their own. The interactive behaviours of two-parent visits were also analyzed. Little difference was found between these cases and cases in which only one parent was present. This finding was consistent regardless of the gender of the parent. In both one- and two-parent visits, mothers displayed more interactive behaviours with their child(ren) than did fathers. These findings suggested that early childhood educators and librarians continue their efforts to encourage parents, particularly fathers, to take an active interest in the early literacy experiences of their children. Some general suggestions were made in this regard.

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In its Programme of Studies, Alberta Education (1993) recognized that the home is the most important community influence in the promotion of learning. Indeed, Alberta Education stated that maximum learning occurs when the efforts and expectations of all agencies effecting children complement each other.

Regarding parent involvement in education, Long (1986) noted

> ... there is a large body of evidence ... which indicates that, whatever the form of involvement, the effect on children's school performance is positive, provided that the involvement is well-planned, comprehensive, and long-lasting, and serves to integrate the child's experiences at home and school. (p. 3)

One of the most important applications of parent-school partnership involves the development of reading interest and ability.

Campbell (1990) has suggested that the following continuum evolves in reading:

Story reading - the adult reads to the child;
Shared reading - the adult and child read together;
Hearing the child read - the child reads to the adult;
Sustained silent reading - the child reads to her/himself.

While the adult is the predominant reader in story reading, it should be noted that all of the above literacy experiences are interactive in nature. In each, the child participates at her/his level of literacy development.

What gains may a young child derive from such experiences?

Campbell states that story reading provides "a gateway into the world of literacy". In summarizing relevant studies, he includes the following benefits:

- an introduction to the enjoyment of reading,
- provision of a positive, secure environment,
- association of reading with pleasure,
- promotion of interest in books,
- insights into the literacy and cultural heritage of society,
- promotion of the socialization of attitudes and values,
- stimulation of imagination and creation of opportunities for emotional, social, and psychological growth,
- provision of a wide range of activities that may stimulate play.

Dudley-Marling (1989) notes additional advantages of helping children discover patterns of written language; positive gains in vocabulary, word knowledge, reading comprehension, reading interests, and overall academic achievement. Moreover, Dudley-Marling considers that story reading may be of special benefit to poor readers.

Morrow (1985) states that a child's reading habits are developed early in life, usually by the sixth grade. Therefore, she considers it appropriate to promote voluntary, or "recreational", reading from a very young age to ensure that the benefits persist in later life.

In affecting a home-school collaboration in early literacy, Bloom (1987) has suggested that school personnel aim for four main goals:

1. to reinforce and confirm parents as educators;
2. to show how books work;
3. to explain the process and practice of reading as perceived by the school;
4. to offer advice and guidance.

Numerous methods have been suggested to achieve these goals. These include

- providing workshops for parents to improve their literacy skills so they may read more confidently to and with their children;
- having parent volunteers read in class, tell stories, help in book-binding, and in raising funds for books and other literacy materials;
- using newsletters and other written communications to list recommended books, authors, parents' guides to children's literature, books on special topics, gift books, uses of the local library or second-hand bookstore;
- establishing regular used-book swaps in which children exchange books to take home;
- holding "Reading Evening" workshops with guest speakers, exhibitions, materials, videos, and teacher discussion;
- establishing a classroom book-lending library.

(The above suggestions were adapted from Dudley-Marling, 1989; Morrow, 1985; Oppenheim et al., 1986; and Robinson, 1987).

In particular, early childhood educators, librarians, and reading specialists encourage parents to take their children to the public library to borrow materials and to become involved in programmes on a regular basis.

But what parent-child interactions actually occur during these library visits? Which parent takes the child(ren) to the library? Are there gender differences in parent-child interactions in the library?

The purpose of the present observational study was to provide an insight into these questions.

METHODOLOGY

Method and Sample Selection

Observations were conducted in the children's section of a local branch of the Edmonton Public Library during weekend library hours. Saturday and Sunday were chosen for observation in order to increase the probability that either parent, or both, would be represented. Saturday observations were one-and-half-hours in duration. Sunday observations were two hours in duration. Observations were conducted on consecutive weekends until all weekend operating hours had been sampled once.

Subjects were observed from the time they entered the children's section until the time they left it.

The Adult-Child Library Interaction Protocol (Table 1) was used to record behaviour. It incorporates features of checklist, participation chart, and anecdotal record formats as outlined by Cartwright and Cartwright (1984).

Table 1
Adult-Child Library Interaction Protocol

	Identity of Adult(s)			
	Mother	Father	Both Parents	Other
Drop off/pick up child(ren)				
Adult selects books alone				
Child selects books alone				
Child reads alone				
Select books together				
Read together				
Comments				

The behaviours recorded ranged along a continuum from least interactive ("drop off/pick up child(ren)") to most interactive ("select books together" and "read together").

A tallymark was recorded in the appropriate column for each behaviour. In instances of two or more children, the adult had to select books with at least one child in order to receive a tallymark in that column.

In instances in which both parents were present, the observed behaviour of each parent was recorded using the "M" and "F" codes in the appropriate column(s).

The "Comments" column was used to elaborate on the identity of "Other", i.e., grandparent, possible adolescent sibling or babysitter.

Observations were restricted to instances in which the child's estimated age was within the toddler-preschool-kindergarten/primary (approximately one-to-eight-years) range. Interactions between adults and older children were not recorded.

Analysis

Table 2 summarizes data regarding the identity of the adult(s) accompanying the child(ren) to the children's section of the library. A total of 121 observations were recorded. Instances in which both parents were involved were counted as only one observation.

Table 2
Identity of Adult(s) Accompanying Child(ren)
(N = 121)

Adult	Frequency	Percent
Mother	61	50.41%
Father	38	31.40%
Both Parents	15	12.40%
Other	7	5.79%
TOTAL	121	100.00%

As indicated in Table 2, library visits involving one parent, more frequently the mother, and both parents, comprise 94.21 percent of the total sample. In the "Other" category, five instances involved an adolescent sibling or babysitter, one a grandmother, and one a tutor.

Table 3 below represents a variety of possible scenerios. "Drop off/pick up child(ren)" represents instances in which the parent's only involvement is to drop off and to pick up the child(ren) at a later time, requesting that the child(ren) leave the library. In such instances, the child(ren)'s behaviour was not recorded further. "Parent or child selects books alone" indicates instances in which the parent or child selects materials independently of each other. "Select alone and together" refers to instances in which either the parent or the child selects materials independently and also collaboratively. The "Child reads alone" category indicates instances in which the parent is seated with the child, but either sits and waits for the child to finish reading or reads a magazine or other adult materials. "Read together" refers to story reading regardless of who chose the books.

Table 3
Frequencies of Library Interactions by Gender of Parent

	Mother	Father
Drop off/pick up	4	11
Parent or child selects books alone	37	17
Child reads alone	6	5
Select books alone and together	4	1
Select together only	29	12
Read together	10	3

By combining frequencies of rows, it is possible to compare the behaviours of mothers and fathers along a dimension of minimal to maximal interaction with children. The first three rows indicate minimal interactive behaviours while rows four, five, and six reflect maximal interaction. Totals for rows one to three comprise 52.22% (47/90) of behaviours for mothers and 67.35% (33/49) of behaviours for fathers. Conversely, totals for rows four, five, and six comprise 47.78% of behaviours for mothers and 32.65% of fathers' behaviours.

Instances involving both parents are analyzed by parent gender in Table 4.

Again, by combining frequencies of the first three and last three rows it is possible to compare mothers and fathers on their degree of involvement with their child(ren) in the library. Totals for rows one to three comprise 50% (11/22) of behaviours for mothers and 68.75% (11/16) of behaviours for fathers. Conversely, totals for rows four, five, and six comprise 50% of behaviours of mothers and 31.25% of fathers' behaviours.

Table 4
Frequency of Behaviours for Two-Parent Examples by Gender of Parent

	Mother	Father
Drops off/picks up	2	6
Parent or child selects books alone	6	3
Child reads alone	3	2
Select books alone and together	1	1
Select books together only	4	2
Read together	6	2

Table 5 shows the relationships among degree of interactive behaviours, gender of parent, and whether parent is alone or accompanied by her/his spouse.

Table 5
Interactive Behaviours, Gender of Parent,
and
Accompaniment/Nonaccompaniment of Spouse

	No Spouse		Spouse	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
Minimal interaction (rows 1-3)	52.22%	67.35%	50.00%	68.75%
Maximal interaction (rows 4-6)	47.78	32.65	50.00	31.25
100% =	(90)	(49)	(22)	(16)

As Table 5 demonstrates, there is little difference in degree of interactive behaviours in relationship to whether the mother or father is accompanied by her/his spouse or alone. Under both circumstances, mothers display more interactive behaviours than do fathers.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings reported in this observational study sought to extend our knowledge of parent-child library interactions.

Although it was limited in terms of sample size and location, a number of general observations can be stated and their educational implications can be considered.

First, it appears that the mother is the primary adult to accompany young children to the library. Instances involving mothers on their own comprise one-half of the total sample. However, this finding is not as strong as that found in Dzama and Gilstrap's (1985) survey. Dzama and Gilstrap found that in 92.365% of cases the mother was the primary home reader. Their data did not report participation in library visits by parent gender, however. Hence, further research could provide additional information regarding the involvement of each parent in early literacy.

Second, the degree to which children and parents in the sample engaged in more or less solitary, parallel activities suggests the need for educators to encourage parents to take an interactive role in their young children's library experiences. In a United States Department of Education publication for parents, entitled "Helping Your Child Use The Library", Perkinson (1989) stresses the importance of not only providing children with opportunities to select their own books, but of helping them to select and discuss materials. A survey involving children enrolled in a reading clinic conducted by Ridout (1992) suggests that parental reading proficiency and attitudes toward reading are important factors in their children's success and interest in reading.

Third, fathers in particular could be encouraged to take an active role in their young children's literacy development. Dudley-Marling (1989) stresses the importance of the father in role-modelling reading, particularly for sons. Dudley-Marling suggests that the father's attitude toward reading may be a crucial factor in the reading success of learning-disabled students.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that this sample represents parents who have made the effort to bring their young children to the public library, even though it is not possible to determine whether they are infrequent or regular library users. Therefore, it appears imperative for educators and librarians to continue their efforts to encourage all parents to take an interest in their children's early literacy experiences. Some methods to promote parent involvement have been suggested in the Introduction of this paper.

Canadian author-educator, Paul Kropp (1993), considers that enjoyment of reading is the most important skill that parents can encourage in their children. This observational study has sought to provide information about the nature of parent-child interaction during a significant aspect of early literacy experience, visits to the public library. Such visits provide potential opportunities for the development of reading enjoyment during the formative years.

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